“Getting the Second Arrow”

Professor Sven Wilson talks about his vision for the department

Professor Sven Wilson earned his BA from Brigham Young University in 1989 and went on to get his Master’s and PhD from the University of Chicago. He has since taught at BYU and recently succeeded Professor Darren Hawkins as chair of the political science department.

What got you into teaching?
Well, my father was an academic and I decided very early on that that was the kind of life that I wanted, so I was an economics major and I got my PhD in economics from the University of Chicago. I ended up coming back here to teach public policy. I’ve been a fish out of water in some ways, but I’ve enjoyed my association with political scientists, and have learned a bit about political science along the way! I’ve worked mostly with graduate students; I’ve taught several undergraduate classes as well, which I’ve enjoyed, and now all of my teaching will be with undergraduates. I’ve always enjoyed the social sciences and thinking about social problems and public policy issues.

If you hadn’t chosen to teach, what would you be doing?
If I had got a PhD but hadn’t pursued work at a university, I think I would have stuck with a research-oriented career. If I hadn’t got a PhD in the first place, I probably would have chosen to do medicine; I study health economics and policy, so I have several interactions with medical research.

If you had a free day, what would you find yourself doing?
Well, I really love to ski, and so I ski as much as I can find time for in the winter – but that’s usually just an hour or two at a time. I enjoy playing tennis and reading, although I don’t read much for fun nowadays. On an ideal day, I think I would choose to have no stresses hanging over my head.

What is your research interest?
I have a wide range of topics I’ve worked on; the main focus is the social determinants of health, particularly marriage and family; my focus these days is on marriage as a factor in public health. I’m giving the faculty lecture in the School of Family Life next month, and I will be speaking on that theme.

What skill sets – qualities and qualifications – have helped you reach your goals?
The ability to accept criticism and rejection is a very useful skill for an academic. You also need to have a passion for finding the answers through an open inquiry; you’ve got to love digging through all the ‘muck’ to find the best answer to your
question. Then, of course there are the obvious things – research skills, a PhD, and so on.

What do you hope to see happen in the department over the next couple of years?

My main goal for the department is to help students increase their professional readiness by adding skills and qualifications going beyond the classes they're taking. I refer to this as 'getting the second arrow.' If you think of yourself as a hunter seeking game, the first arrow doesn’t always strike the mark; sometimes you need a second arrow to finish the job. If you think about your first arrow as a high-quality education, you then get your 'second arrow' through all sorts of different experiences – being a teaching assistant; being a research assistant; doing an internship; participating in the exit polls; taking part in social activities, etc. The key is helping students build their social networks, and job internships are key to that. I want to help create an environment for students where they get not only a good education but where they can be professionally ready. Our redesign of the major is reflective of that – trying to help students focus on professional tracks, and develop those required skills.

As such we require certain things of the students to help them prepare for the professional field. A lot of employers know you’ve been in classes – but what can you actually do? Maybe it’s that you can make great maps, or you’re a master of Excel, or you’re really good at public speaking, or you’ve learned a language (beyond missionary language). So there’s a variety of different ways students can go out there being armed with that 'second arrow.' I also want to see BYU PAS expand for the students; this is already a way for them to get involved with the professional network here before they graduate, so I’d love to continue to build a seamless transition in the social network students have before and after graduation.

In one sentence, if you had to give advice to the students, what would you say?

‘Do now what you can only do now.’ You have the rest of your life to earn money and do other things; make sure to take advantage of the opportunities now that you can only take as a student. I want to emphasize professional readiness and future careers, but I also want students not to miss out on the amazing opportunities they have here at BYU.

Professor Sven Wilson recently assumed the position of department chair for the Political Science department, taking over from Professor Darren Hawkins in Summer 2014.